

## Epiphany 5

One of the first things I learnt when I found myself in a management position involving quite a number of staff, was that everyone was different. We all are different. Don't assume all view the issue at hand as the same way as I did; people have vastly different approaches to decision making, learning, relating with others . . . and so on. There is fact a whole industry out there that is engaged in psychometric testing to quantify and unpack such differences. People try and build work place teams using such techniques. Yes we are all different, thank God; but the jury I believe is still out as to whether we humans, can actually be categorised precisely into a range of personality types.

We can have a useful discussion about this soon.

My issue today though is, why in the matter of our faith, or what we believe, we tend to assume there is only one way in which we can come to faith or believe in God, become a Christian – and that is the way of our group, church or denomination. Everyone will believe like I do.

I simply want to assert today that just as with the workplace, or family or club and society, there are different ways in which we make decisions and act on them – so it is also true with how we come to faith, and in turn sustain that faith.

Our readings today highlight one particular way – and we may think that is true for all; but there is also a hint, especially with the call of the disciples of Jesus, that there may be other ways as well. At the end of the day – there isn't a right and wrong way but some basic elements which should be evident in our coming to faith in different ways.

The call of Isaiah is just one of those all bells whistles – what do we say – mysterious, out of this world, experiential, emotional accounts of coming to faith. Wow. Smoke and mirrors – even the shaking of the very foundations of the temple.

(Read Isaiah 6)

And it was not all that different for the apostle Paul. When we think of the conversion of Paul, we usually think of his road to Damascus experience. . . being blinded and hearing the voice of Jesus saying "Saul, Saul why do you persecute me?" And from then on, his life changes – indeed from Saul to Paul. Our account in 1 Corinthians 15 is in a sense also a call account – and possibly it is just another way for Paul describing his conversion. Paul, in a very Paul way, wants to cut to the chase with these fractious Corinthians as to what is important to believe as a Christian, or as it was known then – being a follower of the Way. And that is that this Jesus that was put to death, in some way still lives and calls us: so, in 1 Cor 15 he tells how Christ came to the disciples (and not the women as the gospels all record), 500 people, a collection of apostles, and then

"Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me." (15.8)

Was this the voice of Jesus outside Damascus- or some other occasion? Who knows – but it also was mysterious. If it was outside Damascus – it wasn't a flesh and bones Jesus riding the other way on a camel; it was a voice, a blinding flash – shades of Isaiah again. A revelation, an epiphany – this for Paul was no 'tick box', answer five questions correctly and you are in, sort of experience. Not an intellectual exercise – but an emotional experience.

Voices in our dreams, or even our wakefulness – is this how the call of God comes. Spectacularly. Blinding flashes. Bells and smells?

Well no – I would like to suggest; yes, perhaps it can happen that way; but there can be other ways too. Consider good old Peter.

We usually think of the fishing four – Simon (Simon Peter), his brother Andrew, and the brothers Zebedee – James and John, simply responding to a straight forward, direct request: ‘follow me’. And certainly that is one way it can be described as to how their call happened. Another way in which one can come to faith. And indeed you may be here today, because of a direct request from a mentor, a friend or family member to be here, to be a Christian. However, what we have with Peter is a little more complex. There is indeed a mix of things.

You may recall Jesus begins his ministry in and around Galilee – the Sea of Galilee. Yes there was that fateful visit back to his home town of Nazareth; but he also was involved in preaching, healing in and around Capernaum. Peter was not yet a disciple. So significantly Jesus just happens to enter Simon’s house and he heals Peter’s mother in law and the crowds come with their sick. There is no recorded conversation at this point with Simon Peter; it just happens to be his house where all the action takes place. A co-incidence? But I am sure you have experienced co-incidences too – the one’s that make you stop and ponder a little more as to what is actually going on here!

Well later – and Luke is not clear here – but later - it could have been days, even a week or so, Peter is fishing. Earning his livelihood. Peter had had a particularly grim night – caught nothing; an experience I can relate to. Still he has to clean his nets. It is when this is happening, Jesus just happens to be addressing a crowd nearby on the shore of the lake. Another of those co-incidences. And for good work place health and safety reasons, Jesus borrows the empty boat and continues his teaching a little way from the shore.

Surely at this point Peter is pondering about this chap who seems to be around – invading his space: his house and his boat. What is he on about; can I believe and follow – an intellectual weighing up takes place. But no commitment. Then next comes an insult – well I can imagine Peter would have taken it as an insult. Peter and the crew had caught nothing that night; it would have been plain for all to see; but Jesus suggests they go out into the deep water and try again. Peter replies – ‘what a waste of time and effort’, though reluctantly, very reluctantly, agrees. Well they got a humungous catch – Peter called over the others to help – there were so many fish their boasts began to sink. A remarkable event. An eerie event given Peter’s experience during the night.

Peter’s response is not well, gee thanks, that was good: it is that of awe – worship (he truly is in the presence of someone who is amazing), fear – he uses the posture of his body; he falls down, to show how he feels. It is all too much: “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man”. In the face of the holy, he considers his own life being less than what it should be. And it was also exactly the same with Isaiah. Amidst his vision Isaiah says: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips.” Coming to faith – somewhere along the line, possibly in the midst of some experience, co-incidence, silence, whatever, involves a self-assessment. My life has not been what it should be; there are things preventing this new journey; a new life - I am not up to it. However both with Isaiah, and with Peter – there is forgiveness, a preparedness to begin afresh – and for each of them to live a transformed life.

With Isaiah, in the midst of his vision, a seraph, a winged mythical creature, takes a hot coal and touches his mouth and says: “now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.” With Peter, Jesus simply says “Do not be afraid.” He then makes that observation “From now on you will be catching people” – and obviously not fish. Coming to faith has a consequence – for Peter, it looks like evangelism, catching people. For Isaiah it was to be a prophet:

to speak the truth, announce God's justice – and explain their situation was dire. There was a task. There is a doing aspect of believing.

So in summary.

First of all there are different prompts to beginning a journey of faith. An out and out vision, voices and the works (I guess it can happen; it happened for Isaiah); but for Peter it was a gradual unfolding, a joining of the dots - there is something going on here which has got my attention, and I am trying to make sense of it all: and the clincher was an exceptional and surprising catch of fish. I perhaps would more basically say, that for Peter and for most of us – it is as St Anselm said about a 1000 years ago – it is 'faith seeking understanding'. Faith makes sense of our life and world and gives us a purpose and meaning.

So there is the prompt to faith; but secondly faith requires a willingness to be transformed. This was my point in my weekly blog about the banking royal commission. The religious response, the lasting response to that inquiry would be that bankers, whoever, would acknowledge their failings - I am lost, I am a man of unclean lips, or as Peter said I am a sinful man. . . and then be open to being transformed, changed – lead a different life.

Why believe something if it is not going to make a difference in your life?

The final thing for both Isaiah and Peter – there was the hint – the suggestion of the next step. This transformed life needs to be engaged in a particular way. Being a fisher of people, being a prophet – being prepared to be sent. Here I am Lord, is it I Lord? Or more likely by being a jolly good teacher, surgeon, carpenter, parent – whatever. As I observed during the week, banks in Australia will only change if they are staffed by people with integrity and not driven by greed. Euphemistically this is called a culture change; but actually it is a whole group of people with transformed lives doing the job to which they were called because they believe in something: like say serving their customers and helping people.

Yes we will come to faith and understand the implications of our faith differently. We are not the same. But that is the exciting thing that can happen. With that diversity in ways of believing in a group, in a church, great things then happen. And you don't need psychometric testing to see it happen and experience it. . . but each of us has to respond to this summons, believe and be transformed in our lives.